



## 8 ROOKIE CANNING MISTAKES

*(And How You Can Overcome Them)*

After all my years of teaching people how to can and preserve food, I've found that sometimes a few simple mistakes can prevent canning success. I'm calling these "Rookie Mistakes". But honestly, even advanced canners do some of these things.

So if you discover that you have done a few of the things listed below, don't feel bad. You are not alone! And although this is not a complete list of every possible mistake, this list can help steer you in the right direction as you learn more.



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### **MISTAKE #1: COVERING UP RATHER THAN SHOWCASING FLAVOR**

There are a lot of ways this can happen in canning and even in cooking. But by far the biggest way that flavor gets covered up (*specifically in jam and jelly making*), is with too much sugar.

If you have ever made a traditional jam or jelly recipe with a commercial pectin, you know that it always calls for a LOT of sugar. And this is because you need a specific ratio of pectin, sugar and acid to get "the gel". In other words, you need a delicate chemical balance in that mix to get the jam or jelly to firm up when you cook it. Otherwise, you end up with fruit syrup and not a jam/jelly.

But many times, all that sugar covers up the exact flavor you are trying to capture. And you can end up with a preserve that tastes like sugar rather than fruit.

There are several ways around this, but the one thing you can NOT do is just reduce the sugar of that recipe you are following. To do so would throw off the balance.

Instead, you need a different recipe...a low/no sugar recipe.

You can get that with a commercial low/no sugar pectin or you can get that with a canning technique that involves using temperature instead of pectin. But either way, you can make a choice toward a different recipe that does not rely on sugar to get the gel.

And when you do that, you end up with a preserve that shows off that fruit flavor instead of the sugar flavor.

Another place where people cover up flavor is by over using spices and herbs. They add "a little something" to the preserves and end up overpowering the flavor of that produce.

The best way to use herbs and spices in your preserve making is as an accessory to the flavor. So you use a light hand and let the natural flavors of the produce shine.



**Takeaway: Think of the flavor you are trying to showcase with every batch of preserves.**

*If you are making a jam or jelly, consider switching to a low sugar recipe. If you are adding some herbs and spices to a traditional recipe, go easy on your first round. Be mindful of what you are trying to achieve with that batch.*

## **MISTAKE #2: DOING OPEN KETTLE CANNING**

Open kettle canning is when you seal your canning jars without actually processing them. And it can happen accidentally or on purpose.

Either way, open kettle canning is NOT okay to do.

It can happen on its own when you are preparing to process your food (*either with a water bath or pressure canner*) and you:

- Fill your jars with hot food
- Add your lids and rings to the jar
- But before you get the jars into the canner, you notice that they sealed themselves.

In other words, you have made a vacuum seal on those jars before they were actually processed in the canner.

And you may wonder...hmmm...do I even need to process them now?

The answer is YES! You still need to process them!

The act of processing those jars in either a water bath canner or pressure canner does a lot more than just create the vacuum seal. It also guards against anything growing in that jar later. It's a safety issue.

In addition, the vacuum seal of an open kettle sealed jar is rarely as strong as a vacuum seal created within a canner. Having a strong seal means a safer jar and a longer shelf life.

So, open Kettle Canning is simply getting a seal without actually canning and it is not considered a safe practice.



**Takeaway: Do not open kettle can your preserves.**

*Always process your jars in either a water bath or pressure canner and do not just let them cool without processing. If you ever discover that your jars have inadvertently sealed on their own, just keep right on going with your process. That "open kettle" seal does not mean you're done.*

### **MISTAKE #3: USING THE WRONG SALT IN QUICK PICKLES:**

A "quick pickle" is a pickle that is not fermented. It is pickled using vinegar; which is a faster process than fermenting – hence the name "quick pickle".

The best salt to use for quick pickles is pickling salt or canning salt. (*The terms "pickling salt" and "canning salt" are interchangeable*)

Pickling salt (canning salt) is a salt that has no additives. It doesn't have any anti-caking agents or any iodine. It is just pure sodium chloride. If you pull your standard household salt off the shelf and you look at the label, you'll see that it has other ingredients besides sodium chloride. And one of those is usually the anti-caking agent.

Now an anti caking agent doesn't hurt us in any way and it does not make our pickles unsafe. But it can make your pickle brine (*or the liquid those pickles sit in*) cloudy. The reason it's in the salt to begin with is to make that salt pourable. Normally, salt will draw moisture out of the air and it would eventually get clumped up and not pour properly out of your salt shaker. So the anti-caking agents are there to keep it pourable. But when used in pickling, that anti-caking agent can make the brine cloudy. There's nothing harmful in that. But it doesn't look too appetizing.

The other ingredient you might find in standard table salt is iodine. Again, iodine does not make your pickles unsafe. But that iodine can make some pickles turn dark, which is also unappetizing.

So in both cases, using a pickling salt will give you something that looks more appetizing. And after all your hard work, that is what you want.



**Takeaway: To have your quick pickles look their best, always use a canning salt (or pickling salt).**

## **MISTAKE #4: LEAVING THE JAR RING ON DURING PANTRY STORAGE**

I think this one comes from the fact that most photographs of finished preserves show the ring ON. But when storing your preserves, you are supposed to take the ring off – and here's why...

Three Things Can Happen If You Don't Remove the Rings:

### 1) You Can Get a False Seal:

The ring can inadvertently hold a lid on the jar that has a broken seal. So, if the vacuum seal is compromised, that ring may make it LOOK as if it is okay when it's not.

Then later, when you pull that jar off the shelf and open it, you may or may NOT be sure if it was sealed. And depending upon how long that jar has been unsealed, you may not notice that the food is going bad.

## 2) You Can Get Rust:

Leaving the ring on can lead to rust build up, which can stick that ring onto the jar like cement. Then later as your try to open that jar with the stuck ring, you can break the seal on the jar. Or was the seal already broken?

Hmmm...Reason number one comes back to bite us again. We don't *know* if we just broke the seal or if it has been unsealed for a long time.

## 3) You Can Get Mold:

The ring can hold particles of food that came out during processing. As that food sits against the lid, it begins to grow mold. This mold can push on the edge of lid and break the seal.



### **Takeaway: Store all jars without the rings.**

*To rest assured that your jars are sealed while sitting on the shelf, you should remove the rings before storing them. Then later when you pick up that jar, you can clearly see if the jar is still sealed.*

## **MISTAKE #5: FAILING TO REMOVE THE BLOSSOM END OF CUCUMBER PICKLES**

There are several things that can help with the crispness of a homemade pickle. But one trick that many people miss is to cut off the blossom end of the cucumber.

The blossom end (*the opposite side from the stem end*) contains enzymes that can cause the cucumber to soften over time. By removing just 1/16<sup>th</sup> of an inch from that end, you prevent those enzymes from becoming a problem and ruining your batch.



**Takeaway: Cut off the blossom end of all cucumbers.**

*Slice away at least 1/16<sup>th</sup> of an inch from the blossom end of each cucumber whenever you whip up a batch and you have a better chance of keeping the pickle crisp.*

## **MISTAKE #6: NOT USING THE FRESHEST VEGETABLES WHEN PICKLING**

Along with capturing flavor, crispness is usually the main goal when pickling. There are several ways to get a crisp pickle. (See #5 above for one tip) But all the tricks in the world will not help you if the produce you are pickling is not impeccably fresh. And by that I mean, it was picked from the vine within the last 24-48 hours.

The moment your produce is pulled from the plant, it begins to lose crispness. So if you want a truly crisp pickle, your best bet is to create the pickle within hours of harvest – not within days or even a week from harvest. Homegrown or farmer's market produce is your best bet for that freshness. Produce in the grocery store would not give you as crisp of a pickle because it was picked a week or more before you got your hands on it.



**Takeaway: Use the freshest produce possible when pickling.**

## **MISTAKE #7: OVER-TIGHTENING THE RING**

I recommend canning with two-piece canning lids. They have a flat, round lid and threaded ring, which holds the lid onto the jar during processing. It is very

common to over-tighten the that ring when preparing the jar for the canner. And doing so can cause the lid to buckle and not get a seal.

If you don't have an experienced canner to show to show exactly how to get the proper feel, it's easy to get it wrong. The best way I can describe it in writing is to say you want that ring to be snug – but not cranked down tight. They call this "finger-tight". If you crank down the lid too tightly, you will not get the proper vacuum seal.



**Takeaway: Do not over-tighten jar rings.**

*When applying the lids and rings, only tighten the rings to finger tight and allow for air to escape and the vacuum seal to form.*



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## **MISTAKE #8: NOT LABELLING YOUR JARS**

This may not sound very important, but I can tell you from experience (yes, *I have done it myself*) that nothing is more frustrating than pulling a jar out from the back of the shelf and not having any idea what it is or when it was canned. Sure, you think you will remember. But that rarely happens. Trust me on this one.



**Takeaway: Label all your jars as soon as they cool.**

*Be sure to write both the contents of the jar and date you canned it. Taking a few minutes to do that, will save you in the end.*

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*...Well now that we got THAT out of the way, let's get canning!*